Citizens Advisory Task Force for the Central Freeway

Preliminary Report of Recommendations

September 21, 1995

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Section I: Task force Purpose

The Citizens Advisory Task Force for the Central Freeway was created in July 1992 by the Board of Supervisors to study alternatives for the Central Freeway. The Task Force was expanded in February 1995 to include representatives from all the affected neighborhoods of the city. The present task force consists of 28 members representing all areas of the city. Our overall purpose, as defined by the Board of Supervisors resolution, is

"to plan land use and transportation improvements for the Hayes Valley and Western Addition neighborhoods".

The immediate objective of the Task Force during the term of the Central Freeway Transportation Study has been to:

"work with city staff, Caltrans and the study team in developing traffic and transit improvements for the Central Freeway corridor"

Section II: The Context

In the 1950's, when the Central Freeway was built, San Francisco was busily demolishing historic neighborhoods to build freeways, and tearing up its streetcar tracks. Today, San Francisco is reconsidering its earthquake-damaged freeways and replacing the streetcars. In our preferred alternative, The Central Freeway Task Force has acknowledged the vision and values of present-day San Francisco, integrating traffic flow, environmental quality, neighborhood cohesion, historic preservation, and public transit into our alternative. In the 1960's, the Freeway Revolt and creation of BART ushered in the regional movement towards multi-modal transportation. In 1986, San Franciscans voted for Proposition M, the Priority Policies of which affirmed the importance of preserving neighborhoods as essential to the identity, economic health, and quality of life of San Francisco. In 1989, San Franciscans voted to tax themselves to replace historic streetcar lines and build four new rail corridors to add to the Muni Metro system. We believe that our alternative moves traffic better than any other, while affirming the Proposition M priority policies and the City's current Master Plan. The completion of *any* Central freeway project, whether retrofit or a rebuild, will be several years from now, possibly in the next century. Our preferred alternative takes a long-term view, because the decision we make today will affect the character of the City for decades to come. Some of the big-picture concerns we considered are:

1. The Completion of Other Freeway Projects: Presently, the Embarcadero and Terminal Separator replacement project is in final environmental review. The closure of these structures after the earthquake caused a major shift in city-wide traffic patterns. Traffic counts show that while the overall traffic levels in the City have remained relatively constant, there has been a 30-40% decrease in peak-hour traffic using the Embarcadero to access the City's north-east neighborhoods. Much of this traffic has shifted to other corridors, causing a corresponding

surge in traffic volumes on South of Market Streets (7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th) and the one-way street couplets of the Central Freeway area (Larkin & Hyde, Franklin & Gough, Oak & Fell). Although none of the alternatives under study for the Embarcadero would carry as many cars as the freeway did, completion of the project will provide some relief for the Central Freeway corridor. Similarly, completing the 280 retrofit will relieve 101 of some commuter traffic to downtown.

2. The Completion of Regional Rail Projects:. the biggest expansion of Bay Area rail transit since BART was built in the 1970's is presently underway. The Joint Powers Board is planning an extension of Caltrain to downtown San Francisco, with an increase to BART levels of service and electrification and modernization of the rolling stock. BART-level service to the Peninsula and Silicon Valley could provide a viable public transit alternative to many commuters using the Central Freeway/101 corridor within the next 5-10 years. BART is extending its tracks along 3 lines in the East Bay, and south from Colma to SFO. In the City, The F-Line is running, with the north Embarcadero extension well under way, while the Embarcadero turnback and south Embarcadero/Mission Bay light rail projects are under construction. These projects will be joined by the planned Third Street, Geary Boulevard, and Chinatown/North Beach light rail projects. The completion of these projects will provide alternatives for many who presently commute by car.

3. Changes to Federal, State, and Regional Transportation Policies: fiscal and environmental concerns are causing a reassessment of transportation policies, which will likely result in motorists paying a larger share of costs associated with driving. A recent Federal EPA\Department of Transportation report cited increased parking prices, higher tolls during peak hours (congestion pricing) and roads pricing some of the most effective ways to meet air quality requirements. Regionally, MTC and think-tanks like Bay Vision 20/20 are promoting similar measures to solve the Bay Area's traffic woes. San Francisco's new Transportation Element of the Master Plan may restructure parking downtown as a way of encouraging ride sharing, transit use, and telecommuting. Cash-strapped governments will increasingly turn to market mechanisms to prevent the need for costly highway projects, and encourage least-cost alternatives to drive alone commuting.

Section III: Goal and Criteria:

as adopted unanimously by the Task Force, June 1995:

Goal:

Select a preferred alternative of traffic and transit improvements for the Central Freeway corridor.

Criteria:

Minimize negative visual impacts

- Apply good urban design principles.
- Recognize the importance of Market Street as a visual corridor, a major public transit corridor, and a grand boulevard, and advance the City's efforts to improve Market Street.
- Preserve the historic character and structures of the affected neighborhoods.

Promote neighborhood cohesion

- No single neighborhood should bear the burden of freeway traffic.
- High-volume traffic should be routed around neighborhoods and onto major traffic arteries.
- Design should encourage traffic to move within legal speed limits.

Allow the maximum reclamation of freeway land for housing, open space, and neighborhood-serving commercial uses

Allow for better management of all elements of the transportation system (Multimodalism)
- Promote public transit operations and the City's Transit-Preferential Streets Program.
- Facilitate pedestrian access to public transit.
- Be compatible with both the existing public transit system and planned improvements.

Accommodate traffic circulation
- Allow for better integration of the freeway system with the system of City streets.
- Offer better choices of freeway access/egress direction.
- Minimize disruption during construction period.

Promote a healthy environment
- Respect and improve the quality and integrity of public open spaces.
- Allow for safe neighborhood streets.
- Promote improved air quality and reduction of noise impacts.

Section IV Our Preferred Alternative

Our preferred alternative is Task Force Alternative 8, with the option of a covered trench crossing under Page and Haight Streets, or a surface boulevard (Similar to Dolores or Park Presidio). We also would like to see further study of the 80/101 merge during the environmental process. Our alternative will move traffic better than either Alternative 3 (Low Deck over Market) or Alternatives 1 & 2 (the retrofit alternatives). The preliminary study by Wilbur Smith & Associates shows our preferred alternative the same number of level "F" intersections (the worst grade) than either the retrofit alternatives or the low deck, and fewer "E" intersections than the retrofits. In addition to moving traffic, our preferred alternative maintains or improves transit service along major transit corridors, and provides opportunities for weaving neighborhoods, and the entire city, back together. The Central Freeway area is where Hayes Valley, Civic Center, SOMA, the Mission, and Upper Market meet. An alternative which heals this area will enrich the City enormously, both aesthetically and economically. The main elements of our alternative are as follows.

1. Remove the elevated concrete portion of the Central Freeway: the integrity of the existing concrete structure has been severely compromised by both its age and the damage sustained in the Loma Prieta earthquake. It is also a vestige, planned and built as part of a much larger freeway system which will never be built. Since it was never planned to be a freeway terminus, it distributes traffic poorly onto city streets. Its bulk cruelly divides the City, and serves as a magnet for crime.
    a. Seismic safety: another large earthquake could cause the structure to collapse. The existing damaged structure represents an imminent threat to the physical safety of neighbors and drivers. The retrofit alternatives put forward by Caltrans would keep the freeway standing, with some traffic moving on it, for the next two to five years, during construction. We agree with Wilbur Smith & Associates that the safety of both drivers and residents could not be reasonably assured because of the likelihood of further earthquakes or construction mishaps.
    b. Traffic flow: presently, traffic coming on to the Central Freeway at Oak Street must cross the traffic coming off the freeway onto Fell Street. Oak and Fell Streets have also had enormous increases in traffic since the earthquake: 72% for Oak and 48% for Fell. The increased traffic levels have unfairly impacted the dense residential Oak and Fell corridors, the Panhandle, and Golden Gate Park.
    c. Public safety: the enormous elevated structure has divided the Hayes Valley neighborhood in two, creating a neighborhood magnet for prostitution, drug dealing, muggings and bashings. This blight extends south across Market, Valencia, Duboce, and Mission Streets.

d. Cost/value impact: the base retrofit proposed by Caltrans (Alt. 1) is estimated to cost $45-50 million. This does not include replacement of the roadbed, which has a remaining lifespan of less than 10 years. The 'Hybrid' alternative, also proposed by Caltrans (Alt. 2) is estimated to cost $65 million, and where it includes major roadbed replacement and reconfiguration, it replicates the existing maldistribution of traffic causing more problem "E" and "F" intersections (7) than our preferred alternative (4).

2. Eliminate the elevated freeway through Hayes Valley and over Market Street: elevated freeways are inappropriate to the dense historic neighborhoods of San Francisco. Our preferred alternative uses at-grade or sunken roadways to move traffic effectively across Market Street, eliminating the blight, noise, crime, and earthquake danger of the old elevated structure. Market Street, the City's main ceremonial and transit spine, will benefit tremendously when the overhead structure is removed. The spectacular renaissance of Hayes Street after the removal of the freeway is testament to the perennial vitality of San Francisco's older neighborhoods. Let Central Market Street become as vital as it is downtown and on Upper Market.

3. Create a better Central Freeway/Van Ness Avenue connection: the Central Freeway and Van Ness Avenue *are* U.S. 101 through the City. A better connection between South Van Ness and the Central Freeway will be created improve north-south traffic flow, and to relieve some of the traffic pressure from residential Gough and Franklin Streets. Presently, there is no direct exit to South Van Ness; cars must exit onto Mission Street, and turn left onto northbound South Van Ness, crossing the flow of traffic coming south to enter the freeway. Traffic then has to negotiate the bottleneck at South Van Ness and Howard Street, these two intersections have some of the highest numbers of accidents in the City. Our preferred alternative includes the following improvements:
   a. Direct offramp to South Van Ness: northbound traffic will exit directly to South Van Ness, not Mission Street, and will no longer have to make the left turn from Mission to South Van ness, crossing southbound South Van Ness traffic.
   b. Improve South Van Ness/ Howard intersection: reconfigure the intersection to improve north-south traffic flow along South Van Ness to the existing freeway entrance and from the new exit.

4. Create a Duboce Street entrance and exit: The present Mission Street exit will be eliminated, and replaced with an entrance and exit on Duboce between Mission and Valencia Streets. This will reduce the conflict between Upper Market traffic and South Van Ness traffic at the existing spiral on-ramp, and will bring Upper Market traffic on to and off of the freeway without crossing Mission Street at grade, allowing both Upper Market traffic and Mission Street transit to move better.

5. Improve transit service: our preferred alternative recognizes the essential role transit plays in moving people through the city, and is designed to facilitate existing Muni service and planned transit improvements.
   a. Mission Street: Mission Street is a major transit artery, carrying more bus passengers than any other street in the City, and will become even more important as a connection to the new downtown Caltrain terminus. Adding the South Van Ness exit and the Duboce entrance and exit allows better Muni bus movement along a two-way Mission Street between South Van Ness and Duboce.
   a. Van Ness Avenue: transit service on Van Ness should be improved by such measures as dedicated lanes in the median, improved traffic signal timing, and/or eliminating parking during peak hours. Reducing conflicts between Muni buses and cars on Van Ness will facilitate both transit ridership and traffic flow.
   c. Haight and Page Streets: In our preferred alternative, Octavia traffic will move underneath Page and Haight Streets, allowing buses to move freely.

   d. **Market Street**: by locating the freeway terminus at Octavia Street, after most of the Muni lines have veered off of Market, our preferred alternative creates only one new long signal on Market Street, which will affect only one Muni line, running on 10-minute headways.

6. Distribute traffic equitably: the Central Freeway was designed as part of a gargantuan freeway network, but presently serves as an elongated offramp. Since the removal of the northern section of the freeway after the Loma Prieta earthquake, the entire burden of traffic north of Market has fallen on Oak and Fell Streets. There have been enormous increases in traffic on already heavily travelled residential streets. This has also brought increased traffic into Golden Gate Park. Our preferred alternative would redistribute some traffic away from the most heavily impacted streets so that no single neighborhood shoulders the entire burden.
   a. **Oak and Fell Streets**: these two streets have borne much of the east-west traffic formerly carried on Turk and Golden Gate Streets, where the old freeway used to end. Traffic has dropped on Turk and Golden Gate Streets. Traffic should be shared more equitably between the two couplets, and neither should be forced to bear significantly more traffic than before the earthquake.
   b. **Franklin and Gough Streets**: traffic on these streets should not increase significantly from pre-earthquake levels. By adding a direct South Van Ness exit and improving South Van Ness traffic flow and signal timing, some traffic, especially trucks, will shift to Van Ness.
   c. **The Tenderloin**: the Tenderloin is one of the densest residential neighborhoods in the city, and needs to be protected from excessive through traffic in the residential section north of Turk Street. The roads should be designed so that traffic diverted from the Central does not negatively impact the north-south streets in the Tenderloin.
   d. **South of Market**: traffic increases from any Central Freeway scheme should be limited as much as possible to non-residential South Van Ness and Division Streets, and protect existing two-way streets, such as 11th and 12th, from excessive through traffic.

7. Improve signage and signalization: signage and signal timing at the freeway exits and entrances and on surface streets can be utilized much more effectively to allow efficient traffic flow and distribute it fairly.

Section VI: Economic Development:

Our preferred alternative creates a host of economic development opportunities for the adjacent neighborhoods and the City as a whole.

1. **Market Street revitalization**: over the past 25 years, the City has invested millions of dollars to beautify Market Street and improve transit service. By eliminating the overhead freeway, our preferred alternative would make Market Street whole again. Vital neighborhood commercial districts have developed on Hayes Street, Valencia Street, and Upper Market, attracting residents and tourists alike. The Central Freeway area is the essential link between them.
2. Opportunities for Housing: Our preferred alternative creates opportunities for housing on land freed by the freeway, and on adjacent parcels which will be freed of crime and blight and have views opened. A surface boulevard on Octavia instead of the trench would reclaim much more land, and warrants further investigation.

Section VII: Costs and Construction Options

Preliminary cost estimates from Wilbur Smith & Associates puts of our preferred alternative at $75 million, approximately the same as the single deck alternative (Alternative 3.). The alternative frees several acres of usable land and increases the value of adjacent land by removing the elevated structure, restoring blocked views, and revitalizing middle Market Street. By moving traffic more efficiently south of Market, this alternative may allow the possibility of a surface boulevard, similar to Dolores or Park Presidio, on Octavia Street. The advantage of this is threefold: it could decrease the cost of the project by up to $25 million, reclaim more land from the freeway, and could minimize construction time and disruption, as traffic flow would be restored to Octavia much sooner. The disadvantages would be decreased traffic flow and possible conflicts with Haight and Page transit. Another variation we want to see studied is the possibility of using Division Street to carry some 101 traffic, eliminating the traffic "weave" on the Central. This variation could also help reduce Octavia traffic, eliminating the need for the trench.

Section VIII: Factors needing further study:

1. Noise impacts
2. Pollution
3. Crime and public safety
4. Economic Development
5. Public Transit
6. Pedestrian Circulation
7. Bicycle Circulation
8. Disabled access/Americans With DisabilitiesAct
9. Master Plan/Proposition M consistency
10. Cost transference to City and Individuals.

Appendix: Proposition M priority policies:

1. That existing neighborhood-serving retail uses be preserved and enhanced and future opportunities for resident employment in and ownership of such businesses enhanced;
2. That existing housing and neighborhood character be conserved and protected in order to preserve the cultural and economic diversity of our neighborhoods;
3. That the City's supply of affordable housing be preserved and enhanced;
4. That commuter traffic not impede Muni transit service or overburden our streets or neighborhood parking;
5. That a diverse economic base be maintained by protecting our industrial and service sectors from displacement due to commercial office development, and that future opportunities for resident employment and ownership in these sectors be enhanced;
6. That the City achieve the greatest possible preparedness to protect against injury and loss of life in an earthquake;
7. That landmarks and historic buildings be preserved, and.
8. That our parks and open space and their access to sunlight and vistas be protected from development.